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Editorial

Alytes, a different journal

Alain DUBOIS

Vertébrés: Reptiles & Amphibiens,
USM 0602 Taxonomie & Collections,
Département de Systématique & Évolution,
Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle,
25 rue Cuvier, 75005 Paris, France
<dubois@mnhn.fr>

Created in 1982, the journal *Alytes* is now in its third decade of existence. This is enough to have a good picture of its particularities, strengths and weaknesses, which can help improving its qualities in the future, and guiding authors who wish to submit papers to this journal, or who are to act as corresponding editors or reviewers of papers submitted for publication.

From its very start, the aim of the creators of *Alytes* was not to make "just another journal", similar in many respects to others, but a different journal, with a particular content and an editorial policy of its own. As a matter of fact, *Alytes* published papers that other journals would have rejected, but refused others, or asked for significant modifications before acceptance. For future contributors and readers of this journal, it may be useful to explore these differences in some details.

THE EDITORIAL POLICY OF *ALYTES*

THE BATRACHOLOGICAL FOCUS

As for the content, *Alytes* was the first batrachological in the world, i.e. the first journal to be uniquely devoted to the publication of papers dealing with amphibians, but excluding reptiles from its field. The reasons for this choice are several and were presented in detail in the journal (MORÈRE, 1982; DUBOIS, 1991). Although this policy is scientifically justified, it has a drawback, in simple terms of the number of potential subscribers to the journal: zoologists working on amphibians alone are less numerous than the total of those working on "herpetology" as a whole, i.e. on amphibians and/or reptiles. Given the relatively high (and regularly growing) number of herpetological journals worldwide, it has become increasingly difficult for any given herpetologist to subscribe to all of them: choices are inescapable, and a journal with a limited scope may appear less attractive or indispensable than others. However, the journal has lived for more than 20 years, and without any institutional financial help of any kind: it did so because of the strong support it has received from the start, and over years, from individual batrachologists. The journal *Alytes* exists today because a relatively low but rather constant number of zoologists are strongly motivated by the study and knowledge of amphibians, and are glad to receive a journal which "only" deals with these animals.

This particularity of the journal is important, and has some practical consequences on the way the journal is edited. Because a large proportion of *Alytes* subscribers are "lovers", not to say "fanatics", of amphibians, papers published in the journal must be edited, at least in part, with a batrachological focus in mind. This means that such papers are welcome to contain rather long and detailed statements on the animal studied themselves, the amphibians, and cannot be only concerned with general scientific

questions which these animals could help to solve as a "model" or as a "material" among others. This does not imply that such papers can contain scientific inaccuracies or errors that would result in their rejection by other journals: such scientific flaws or mistakes are as unacceptable in *Alytes* as elsewhere. But editors and referees of papers submitted to *Alytes* should keep in mind that most readers of the journal, beside their likely interest in "general questions" like evolution, ecology or behaviour, are also *interested in the animals (frogs, salamanders or cecilians) for themselves*. Therefore, a number of details on the specimens studied, their places and conditions of capture and study, their behaviour and characters, can be relevant for such readers. This can include various "collateral" comments and observations on some unusual or unknown facts of various kinds, which would not be relevant for a similar paper submitted to a journal of evolution, ecology or ethology.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE COMMENTS

BOUR & DUBOIS (1994) proposed the distinction between two categories of criticisms or comments of manuscripts by referees and editors: "*objective* criticisms, pointing to *factual* mistakes in the manuscript (incomplete or erroneous bibliographic information, methodological mistakes, obscure writing, etc.); and *subjective* criticisms, the referee expressing an *opinion* different from or complementary to the author's one regarding the interpretation of certain facts" (BOUR & DUBOIS, 1994: 3). Except in a few borderline cases, this distinction is usually clear and easy. Referees and editors of *Alytes* are welcome to provide both kinds of comments to authors of papers, but in a different perspective: whereas objective comments *must* result in changes in the manuscript for acceptance in the journal, this is not compulsory for subjective comments, which authors are free to follow or not, as will be discussed at more length below.

ORTHODOXY AND CENSORSHIP

Although science advances in part through an accumulation of new data and results, this is not the whole story. Science itself would not have developed if it had not faced regularly unconventional ideas, theories, hypotheses and opinions. Rejection of a paper because it does not follow a general consensus among scientists of today is not acceptable in *Alytes*: provided rational arguments are given to support it, any unusual idea or opinion, any provocative hypothesis, is welcome for publication in *Alytes*, as it may contribute to stimulate new studies and to open new ways. A paper cannot be rejected by *Alytes* merely because it follows unconventional thinking, methods, theories or approaches. Reference to "standard" methods, to "consensual" terms (even if poorly defined or used in a wrong way by many) or to "widely shared opinions" are not relevant in this respect. This does not mean that *Alytes* can accept any manuscript for publication, given that it is "original": the new ideas or proposals must be supported by explicit statements and concepts, but if this is the case, editors and referees are not entitled to reject a paper on the ground that they do not share these ideas.

To put the same things differently, *Alytes* is not supporting any kind of scientific *orthodoxy*. Ayatollahs are numerous enough in the globalised scientific world of today, and especially among editors of periodicals and books, and we don't want to join the club. Open-minded authors are welcome to submit unusual papers to the journal, and open-minded colleagues are welcome to act as editors or referees for these papers. We consider that the rôle of referees and editors of papers is not to express any *censorship* on opinions or proposals, or to find (sometimes imaginary) flaws in as many submitted papers as possible in order to severely reduce the number of papers accepted in the journal. We do not expect referees and editors to show their excellency and superiority on authors, but to share their expertise with the latter and to help them improving the quality of the papers by providing unknown references, making suggestions on the format and contents, etc. Referees and editors of *Alytes* are not encouraged to write aggressive or hurtful comments on the manuscripts, as is too often the case in a number of so-called "high-ranked" journals: although this may flatter the egos of some, this brings nothing positive to anyone or to science. In contrast, referees and editors can play a useful pedagogical rôle for authors of manuscripts, while respecting their personalities and styles.

A frequent feature of the current, as well as the past, scientific community, is its tendency to recognise among scientists some "leaders", that are considered the "best specialists" of some questions, research fields or theories. In zoology, this often results in considering that a given person, or team, is the

"depository", or "owner", of orthodoxy in a given scientific field. Such "mandarins" tend to be consulted as referees for many papers submitted worldwide for publication in various journals. Of course this procedure allows any paper dealing with a given subject to be read and studied by someone who is well informed of the existing scientific literature in the same field and who can therefore provide useful constructive comments on this manuscript. However, in some cases, such a "specialist" will have difficulties accepting that a new theory be developed in this field, that might challenge his/her own works. Unfortunately, innumerable examples exist of such situations, where introduction of a new theory or even of new facts were barred for a number of years from publication, simply because these new ideas were contradicting the dominant ideas in the same field: in frogs, the cases of the taxonomies of the "species" *Rana esculenta* and *Rana pipiens*, which both proved to be species complexes, are good examples of this situation (DUBOIS, 1977). To try and avoid such situations of "monopoly" of some research fields by some persons or groups of persons, manuscripts submitted to *Alytes* are managed by corresponding editors who are free to ask, or not, reports from such "prominent specialists", but in all cases the last word remains in the hand of the corresponding editor, who may decide to follow their suggestions or not.

SUBJECTIVE COMMENTS ON MANUSCRIPT'S CONTENT, LENGTH AND STYLE

Subjective comments, as defined above, are meant at suggesting improvements, especially in format and style, of the original manuscript. Authors are free to follow them or not: although in many cases they indeed accept them, refusal of doing so is not considered by itself a reason for rejecting the publication of the paper in *Alytes*. The author, not the referee or editor, is the person who signs it, and who remains the master of the final manuscript. Subjective comments may include pure stylistic language or terminological suggestions, but also suggestions regarding the plan of the paper, the format of tables, the plan and format of descriptive parts (including descriptions of taxa), etc. To take a real example from the past, it is not acceptable to reject a paper submitted to *Alytes* merely on account of the fact that descriptions of new species in this paper do not follow a plan "usual" for the description of species of the same genus: although using this plan may facilitate comparisons, the author may have good reasons for using a new, distinct plan, and this may help improving future publications on this group. As there (fortunately) exists no "international code of taxonomy", automatic rejection of such a paper would result only from following "fashions" or "lobbies", and is not compatible with the respect of freedom of thought and action that *Alytes* promotes.

Unlike many other scientific journals nowadays, *Alytes* does not have a restrictive philosophy regarding the length of papers. In order to save printing space, many journals tend to accept only papers written in a very concise, not to say telegraphic, style. They request from authors shortening of sentences, tightening of information, and, very often and more questionably, simplification and schematisation of thinking and of statements. Many journals will refuse qualifying formulae such as "it seems that", "the data support the conclusion that" or "the results are not in conflict with the idea that", to accept only positive, clear-cut and peremptory statements. To take just one (frequent) example, although cladograms are no doubt "hypotheses about phylogeny", that furthermore have usually a lifespan limited to the period until a new cladistic study of the same group is published, many authors present them shortly as "phylogenies", which is incorrect. In contrast to this trend, *Alytes* encourages the publication of conditional and prudent statements, of working hypotheses as such, etc.

In *Alytes*, the length of a paper is not to be judged "by itself", but relative to its content, to the importance and quality of the new information it provides. There is no a priori length limitation for papers in *Alytes*, but editors may suggest that a paper is too long, or too short, according to the quality and quantity of information it contains.

Cultural and linguistic differences may be at stake here. A long experience of editorship of this journal suggests that authors writing in French tend to express themselves in more details and in longer sentences than authors writing in English, and that authors writing in Spanish tend to be still more expansive than those writing in French. This cultural stylistic difference is respected in *Alytes*, provided it does not result in strongly repetitive texts where the same idea or information is presented several times without clear justification. More specifically, *Alytes* tends to respect the personal writing styles of authors, as the persons who sign a paper are its real producers and have the right to express their thoughts in the way they prefer.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

In order for a paper published in *Alytes* to be useful for future readers, even in a long run, this paper must include all first-hand data on which its discussion and conclusion are based, and should not refer to unpublished information allegedly "obtainable from the authors" (but which are likely to become unobtainable in a shorter or longer run). Therefore *Alytes* puts no a priori limitation on the number or lengths of tables or appendices. Similarly, as recently discussed (DUBOIS, 2003b), bibliographic references quoted must be limited to permanent documents (books, periodicals, CD-Roms, etc.), excluding online sites. Until devices are generalised allowing permanent storage and free, permanent and easy accessibility of online sites (DELLAVALLE et al., 2003), *Alytes* will refuse inclusion of such references in bibliographies.

We expect authors of papers submitted to *Alytes* to provide a satisfying bibliographic coverage of the subject of the paper. This means that this coverage should be historically and geographically large, not to say complete. The bibliography cannot be restricted to papers published in the recent years (and available as PDF on internet) or in a single country or language. Even if a given paper usually cannot give a complete bibliographic list of the publications dealing with its field, it should at least provide reference to major bibliographic sources (e.g., review papers) where such references can be found. Whenever a paper submitted to *Alytes* cites works in languages other than its own, evidence should be given that they were not merely quoted, but also read and understood, which may require in some cases to have these works translated: it is unacceptable for example to write a paper on a Chinese frog that would ignore the major references on this frog in Chinese language or the major information contained in these publications.

PROBLEMS IN CONTENT

As mentioned above, papers are not to be rejected from *Alytes* merely on account that a referee or editor does not agree with the opinions or suggestions of an author. We consider such rejections for subjective reasons as a kind of *ensorship* of scientific thinking, and we think the progress of science is made possible only through free debate of diverging opinions, not by "silencing" some points of views or some authors. Similar concerns have already been expressed by various other scientists in the past. However, it is clear that some papers cannot be published in serious scientific journals because of real methodological, reasoning or presentation flaws, or because the results presented do not allow to draw the conclusions they are purported to support.

Unless and until the international community of zoologists decides to change it or to replace it, the current *International code of zoological nomenclature* (ANONYMOUS, 1999) has force of law for all zoologists worldwide. They are bound to follow it strictly, and not doing so is a reason for the editors of *Alytes* to request modification of the manuscript, or to reject it if these changes are not accepted by the author. Similarly, grammatical mistakes, incorrect use of terminology, calculation mistakes, clear methodological mistakes in the study, grossly incomplete bibliographic coverage of the question at stake, unwarranted conclusions drawn from the data through superficial reasoning, are all objective reasons for asking for changes in a manuscript or for rejecting it.

In taxonomic or cladistic works, use of non-morphological characters (based on molecular, karyological, bioacoustic, ethological studies) has become more and more important in the recent decades, with major consequences on our understanding of the relationships between organisms. *Alytes* encourages submission of manuscripts using these approaches, but an important condition for their acceptance is the deposition of voucher specimens of any such study in a public collection where they can be examined by other colleagues: this will allow to examine these specimens again if the results are problematic or contradictory to those of other studies. Morphological, molecular, bioacoustic or karyological studies carried out on specimens that were not preserved cannot be published in *Alytes*. Similarly, name-bearing types of new specific or subspecific taxa described in *Alytes* must be deposited in a public collection (museum, university, etc.) where they will be available to the international scientific community.

Evidence should be presented that specimens used in studies submitted to *Alytes* were collected in agreement with the international and national laws concerning nature conservation, animal transporta-

tion and experimentation. The manuscript should make clear that their collection and the conditions of their use for research (including anaesthesia or euthanasia procedures) were necessary for the purpose of advancing scientific research and were not merely a routine procedure (DUBOIS, 1997: 176).

PROSPECTS

Alytes has its strengths but also its weaknesses. A clear strength of the journal is its involvement in the urgent process of inventorying the amphibian biodiversity of our planet while it is still possible to do it, at the beginning of the "century of extinctions" (DUBOIS, 2003a). From its beginning in 1982, *Alytes* has published many taxonomic papers, including 103 new names of amphibian taxa, i.e. 67 new species and subspecies, 18 new genera and subgenera, 6 new subfamilies and tribes, and 12 replacement names for invalid names. The journal has also regularly published detailed, sometimes very long, papers dealing with the morphology, anatomy or comparative anatomy of adult and larval amphibians, a kind of papers which has become increasingly difficult to publish in the recent times.

The regular publication in *Alytes* of taxonomic revisions has consequences on the format of the journal. The one-column format, which has disappeared from a number of older journals, is used in *Alytes*, as this format allows a much better, readable and detailed presentation of "synonymies" or logonymies, as explained in detail elsewhere (DUBOIS, 2000: 62): even in two-column journals, use of a single column centered in the page can allow a better presentation of logonymies (see e.g.: DUBOIS & OHLER, 1999: 171-172; BOSSUYT & DUBOIS, 2001: 84-96).

A particular matter of concern regarding *Alytes* is the quality of illustrations. Until now, this quality has been quite uneven, from excellent in a number of cases to rather poor in some others. In the coming years, we would like to put emphasis on this aspect, and to work for a real improvement of the overall quality of figures in the journal. A noteworthy problem results from figures that are not precise enough in their details to allow full-page or half-page reproduction. Quality of illustration has much to gain when authors devise the size and arrangement of their figures with the format of the journal in mind. In particular, rather than several small isolated figures, it is much better to arrange them as a single plate whose dimensions are such as to allow a good quality reduction to the size of a page of *Alytes*. Although in some cases this is likely to delay significantly the final acceptance of a manuscript for publication in *Alytes*, in the coming issues of the journal emphasis will be put on this question, in order to significantly increase the quality of iconography in *Alytes*. We will appreciate the efforts that authors submitting papers to the journal, as well as referees who will report on these manuscripts, will make in this respect.

The strong interest of the journal *Alytes* in taxonomy and descriptive anatomical papers has become the "stamp" of the journal, so that a number of authors will consider this journal for submission of new species descriptions, taxonomic revisions, comparative anatomy reviews of characters or descriptions of newly discovered tadpoles. In contrast, far less numerous authors will think about *Alytes* for submitting papers on ecology, behaviour, parasitology or paleontology of amphibians, to take just a few examples. This is the only reason for the scarcity of such papers in the journal, not any decision or preference of the editors. Whenever a number of authors working in such research fields, either from the same or different laboratories, will decide to use *Alytes* as an outlet for some of their works, the general image of the journal may change, which may attract further authors or subscribers. This is just a matter for a number of batrachologists working in fields other than systematics and anatomy to decide to invest *Alytes* and make the journal partly theirs: they are welcome to do so. In particular, authors studying the facts and problems of amphibian declines and extinctions, of mass anomalies and diseases in amphibians, are welcome to submit their works to *Alytes*, which was among the first journals to draw the attention to the existence and importance of these phenomena (WAKE et al., 1991; TYLER, 1991; KUZMIN, 1994).

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